

Hearts of Our People

By Melvia A. Hasman

“They are a loving people, without covetousness. Their speech is the sweetest and gentlest in the world.”

Christopher Columbus wrote these words about the first Native Americans that he met in the New World-the Arawaks of the West Indies. In the late 15th century, there were about one million Native Americans in North and Central America living in 650 tribes-300 in North America and 350 in Mexico and Central America. They were diverse, with different cultures and as many as 2,200 languages.

Some groups lived in cities and villages; others were nomads. Some were farmers; others hunted animals and gathered food. Some lived in bands of between 20 and 300 people; some lived in tribes, a group of bands; some lived in nations, a group of tribes. Some tribes had democratic social structures; others had rigid class systems. Today the Native American cultures fall into one of 12 cultural areas: Northeast, Southeast, Great Plains, Southwest, Great Basin, California, Northwest Coast, Plateau, Arctic, Subarctic, Mesoamerica, and circum Caribbean.

Native Americans lived in societies that were generally egalitarian, with customs and traditions regulating their social life. They believed that if a person departed from the traditional customs and religious ceremonies, harm would come to him or her.

But the basic difference between the Native Americans and the European settlers was their philosophies toward the land, and it was the main cause of conflict. The Native Americans lived in harmony with nature and believed that the land could not be the private property of individuals. Instead, they were allowed to use the land. On the other hand, the European settlers believed strongly in private and individual ownership of land and came to the New World seeking land. This conflict and the efforts to resolve it shaped the history between these two groups of peoples during a 400-year period.

These conflicts formed the Native American story-the dispossession of cultures, the movement of tribes, the cession of millions of acres of land, and the assimilation into the “American culture.” Between 1607 and 1890 the United States signed 370 peace treaties with Native American tribes and established more than 300 reservations in the various states and numerous Indian communities, including the Inuit (Eskimo Indian) region.

During this period many Indian leaders emerged. They were independent thinkers whose philosophies often caused conflicts within their groups and with the leaders of the white communities. One such person was Chief Seattle.

Seattle (1786-1866), also known as Sealth, was a leader, diplomat, and orator of the Suquamish and Duwamish (his father and mother’s tribes, respectively). During the early 1800s Seattle led many successful raids and gained prestige throughout the Puget Sound area. After the battle in

which his son was killed, Seattle decided to become a diplomat. When Governor Stevens arrived in the region to establish American rule, he appointed Seattle as head chief for the region.

More and more settlers moved into the area, and in 1854 the governor of Washington Territory called together the tribes to propose a new treaty. This treaty would send the Seattle's tribes to a reservation and the government would control their lands. The speech delivered by Chief Seattle during the treaty negotiations eloquently defended Indian lands and traditions.

There are several versions of the speech, published in the Seattle Sunday Star, Seattle Washington Territory, October 29, 1887. Excerpt from one version of that speech is on the next page.

Although Seattle continued to counsel for peace, the conflict lasted many years. Finally, Seattle moved onto a small patch of land on the western side of Puget Sound, where he spent the remainder of his life. Chief Seattle died on June 7, 1866, and is buried in the tribal cemetery at Suquamish, Washington.

Dr. Maynard, an Indian agent, became good friends with Chief Seattle and later suggested that the new town of Alki Point be named after him. But the English speaking settlers could not pronounce the guttural sounds used in Chief Seattle's real name, Sealth, so they smoothed it out to Seattle.

Today, many monuments in Washington honor Chief Seattle, and each August a Chief Seattle Days celebration is held, with traditional dancing, salmon dinners, and traditional canoe races.

Yonder sky that has wept tears of compassion upon my people for centuries untold, and which to us appears changeless and eternal, may change. Today is fair. Tomorrow it may be overcast with clouds...

There was a time when our people covered the land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea cover its shell-paved floor, but that time long since passed away with the greatness of tribes that are now but a mournful memory. I will not dwell on, nor mourn over, our untimely decay, nor reproach my paleface brothers with hastening it, as we too may have been somewhat to blame...

Our dead never forget this beautiful world that gave them being. They still love its verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains, sequestered vales and verdant lined lakes and bays, and ever yearn in tender fond affection over the lonely hearted living, and often return from the happy hunting ground to visit, guide, console, and comfort them...

A few more moons, a few more winters, and not one of the descendants of the mighty hosts that once moved over this broad land or lived in happy homes, protected by the Great Spirit, will remain to mourn over the graves of a people once more powerful and hopeful than yours. But why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless. Your time of decay may be distant, but it will surely come, for even the White Man whose God walked and

talked with him as friend to friend cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We will see...

And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the road, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude...

At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone...

Sacred Mountains of the Wintuns
Here Indian youth and maiden strayed,
And nature's children, laughing, played.
And near yon tall and piney wood
Once the war chief's village stood.
Where chants from a thousand throats
Rose unto heaven in sweetest notes,
Here Norail-poot-as lived and died
And now lies sleeping by thy tide.
Oh, white man take this land of ours,
Guard well its hills, streams, and bowers,
Guard well the mounds where Wintuns sleep,
Guard well these canyons wide and deep.

by A. C. Gillis
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